Australia’s Under-16 Social Media Ban Fails: 73% Ignore It

Compliance sits at 27% and the model says it has further to fall.

By **Cindy Harper** May 1, 2026 5 min read + Subscribe Share

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Australia’s under-16 social media ban has been in force for four months and the headline finding from a new working paper out of the University of Chicago’s Becker Friedman Institute is that around three-quarters of the teenagers it targets are ignoring it.

The paper, “Why Bans Fail: Tipping Points and Australia’s Social Media Ban,” surveyed 746 Australian teenagers between March and April 2026. Among 14- and 15-year-olds covered by the ban, only about 27% are complying. The other 73% are still using Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X, YouTube, Reddit, Twitch, Threads, or

Kick, the ten platforms the law designates off-limits to anyone under 16.

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The Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 took effect on 10 December 2025, making Australia the first country to outlaw teenage social media accounts at the federal level.

More than a dozen other countries and numerous US states are now considering versions of the same approach. The Australian model places enforcement entirely on the platforms, which face penalties of up to A$49.5 million for failing to take “reasonable steps” to keep under-16s off their services. Teenagers themselves face no legal sanction.

The teenagers know this. According to the survey, only 22% of banned teens believe they personally face any consequence for using a banned platform.

47% correctly understand that the consequences fall on the companies. Awareness of the ban is near-universal at 86%. The teens aren’t confused about what the law says. They’ve simply concluded, accurately, that the law isn’t aimed at them.

Getting around the restrictions takes minimal effort. 75% of banned teens describe circumvention as easy or very easy.

The most common workarounds are the obvious ones: lying about age on verification prompts (57%), entering false birthdates at sign-up (44%), borrowing a parent’s or older sibling’s account (42%), and routing through a VPN (30%). 64% of 14- and 15-year-olds in the survey have not had their accounts removed at all. The platforms haven’t found them. A quarter of non-compliers report that a parent,

older sibling, or other adult helped them sign up for a new account after a previous one was deactivated.

The researchers also asked teenagers a more interesting question. What share of your peers would need to stop using social media before you stopped? The average answer was 69%. Some teens placed the threshold even higher. The result holds across every way the question was framed, whether the reference group was age peers, classmates, the wider school, or "a typical person your age." The numbers came out between 62% and 69% in every variant.

That gap, between 27% actual compliance and a 69% threshold, is the paper's central finding. The model the researchers build from the data suggests that the only stable equilibrium under current conditions is around 18% compliance, lower than what's already observed. Compliance is more likely to erode than to grow.

Then there is the social composition of who complies. 47% of surveyed teenagers said the kids who comply with the ban are less popular than the kids who don't. Only 5% said compliers are more popular. Among current users of banned platforms, 52% rated compliers as less popular. The teens still on the platforms have, on average, around twice the Instagram follower count of those who have left, 470 versus 200.

The authors point to cigarette smoking as the inverse precedent. Higher-status smokers quit first, connected friend groups quit together and over time continued smokers became peripheral in their social networks.

The Australian ban is producing the opposite pattern. The popular kids are staying, the less popular kids are leaving and being on social media remains the cool thing to do.

The justification for the ban rests on adolescent mental health concerns and the government's framing presents the law as protective.

The data shows what happens when a state assumes the authority to wall off entire categories of speech and association from a class of citizens, then leaves the actual decision-making to companies operating under threat of nine-figure fines.

The companies decide, by means they don't fully disclose, who is and isn't allowed to participate. Detection methods used so far include facial age estimation, identity verification, behavioral inference from language and login patterns and signals from peer networks. Algorithms parse user behavior to guess at age. Errors fall on individual users with no recourse worth speaking of.

The paper's authors are careful not to dismiss the law's longer-term prospects entirely. They note that norms can shift over decades and that the cigarette precedent to which we return below is a reminder that decades-scale norm change is possible.

The current architecture, which places enforcement on platforms and makes individual non-compliance invisible, doesn't activate the channel through which laws change behavior by changing what people see their peers doing. When visible peer behavior continues to signal widespread use, the descriptive norm works against the legal message rather than reinforcing it.

The law tells teenagers they cannot have these accounts. The teenagers can see, on the same platforms the law says they can't use, that everyone they know still has them. Among the 14- and 15-year-olds who believe all five of their closest friends are still on banned platforms, 86% report using those platforms themselves in the past week. Among those who believe none of their five closest friends are still on them, the figure drops to 15%.

What Australia has produced, four months in, is a law that almost no one under 16 obeys, that targets the least popular kids most successfully, that the targeted kids consider trivial to evade, and that has not changed the social environment it was designed to change.

The government got a press cycle, the platforms got a compliance theatre to perform, and the kids got a lesson in how laws work when they're written about them rather than for them.

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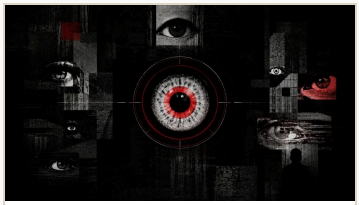

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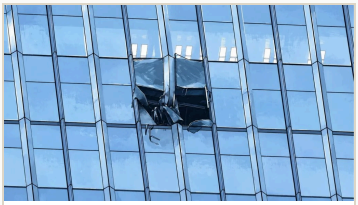

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